



from the

OFFICE OF REPRESENTATIVE JEFF HELFRICH

For Immediate Release

Date: August 4, 2023

Contact: Dru Draper

Email: Dru.Draper@OregonLegislature.Gov

Representative Helfrich Sends Letter to Governor Kotek Urging State Disaster Declaration for Oregon Cherry Industry

SALEM, OR – This week, Representative Jeff Helfrich (R-Hood River) sent a letter to Governor Tina Kotek urging her to issue a State Disaster for Oregon’s cherry industry.

Sweet cherries are one of the state’s top 20 most valuable commodities, but, due to harsh weather conditions and Oregon’s cherry crop overlapping with California cherry harvest, producers are facing severe financial losses.

*“The market glut created by the late arrival of the California cherry harvest season forced Oregon growers to harvest less than 75 percent of their crop; many of our smaller growers had to leave 50 percent or more of cherries unpicked,” **wrote Helfrich.** “The usual month-long cherry harvest in Wasco and Hood River counties was less than two weeks this year because of the crowded market. Without timely assistance, Oregon cherry growers’ livelihoods are at risk of being lost altogether.”*

As Vice Chair of the House Committee on Housing and Homelessness, Helfrich also highlighted the risk this crisis poses to Oregon’s severe housing shortage.

*“Oregon’s top-producing cherry counties – Wasco and Hood River – provide two-thirds of the state’s registered agricultural labor housing. This housing is provided for both farm workers and their families. Less cherry harvest work means less housing is available, adding to Oregon’s precarious housing crisis,” **wrote Helfrich.***

Helfrich noted that declaring a state disaster for Oregon’s cherry industry would provide critical relief and reinforce the state’s commitment to the agricultural community.

*“In light of current circumstances and to provide the necessary support to our cherished sweet cherry producers, I earnestly request that you declare a State Disaster for the Oregon cherry industry,” **wrote Helfrich.** “Such a declaration would enable the affected farmers to access critical resources and relief measures to help them recover from the damage incurred.”*

A copy of the letter is attached to this press release.

###

JEFFREY A. HELFRICH
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
DISTRICT 52



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

July 31, 2023

The Honorable Tina Kotek
Office of the Governor
900 Court Street, NE Suite 254
Salem, Oregon 97301

Sent electronically

Subject: Request for State Disaster Declaration for Oregon Cherry Producers

Dear Governor Kotek,

I am writing to bring to your attention a matter of critical importance that is affecting the livelihoods of numerous Oregon sweet cherry producers in my legislative district and across the state.

As you know, the sweet cherry industry in Oregon plays a vital role in our state's agricultural sector and contributes significantly to the economy. Oregon Department of Agriculture lists sweet cherries among the state's top 20 most valuable commodities. Unfortunately, our cherry producers have been facing severe hardships due to unprecedented and adverse weather conditions in Oregon such as ice storms, excessive heat, and wildfire smoke impacts caused by a warming climate. Additionally, this season many California cherry growers were unable to harvest their crop on time because of that state's record cold and wet spring, which pushed its cherry harvest back weeks. This resulted in an overlap with Oregon that has severely impacted cherry orchards across the state. Sweet cherries are a perishable fruit; prices crashed when California's crop arrived so close to the Oregon harvest.

Financial losses will be severe for many Oregon sweet cherry producers, and for the farmworkers and communities who rely on the summer influx of economic activity during the cherry harvest.

These suppressed sweet cherry prices have clear consequences. USDA-AMS cherry volume data shows that California's crop was twice as large and three weeks later than it was in 2022, a climate-caused delay that created direct competition with Oregon producers. One year ago, Oregon cherry farmers saw a return of \$1.10 per pound of fresh cherries. That return has dropped to less than 55 cents per pound in 2023 – at least one local packer will pay only 35 cents per pound. In June this year, the USDA projected total U.S. production would increase by 60 percent. However, cherry prices have been near or below the cost of harvest this summer. The market glut created by the late arrival of the California cherry harvest

Capitol Address: 900 State Street NE, H-371, Salem, OR 97301 – Phone: (503) 986-1452
Rep.JeffHelfrich@oregonlegislature.gov – www.oregonlegislature.gov/Helfrich



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

season forced Oregon growers to harvest less than 75 percent of their crop; many of our smaller growers had to leave 50 percent or more of cherries unpicked. The usual month-long cherry harvest in Wasco and Hood River counties was less than two weeks this year because of the crowded market. Without timely assistance, Oregon cherry growers' livelihoods are at risk of being lost altogether.

These climate-induced conditions have another consequence regarding the farm workforce and housing. With substantially fewer cherries being picked, there is less work and economic benefits that cherry-growing communities rely on every summer. Oregon's top-producing cherry counties – Wasco and Hood River – provide two-thirds of the state's registered agricultural labor housing. This housing is provided for both farm workers and their families. Less cherry harvest work means less housing is available, adding to Oregon's precarious housing crisis.

The following are some examples of the specific loss estimates from sweet cherry producers within House District 52:

- Wasco County has 7,000 acres in sweet cherry production. Its growers state between 25 to 40 percent of acreage could not be harvested because of low cherry prices. A similar trend is occurring in Hood River County.
- In 2023, growers invested 93 cents per pound to grow sweet cherries. Growers received at best a 53-cent per pound return leading to a 40-cent loss for harvested sweet cherries. In these climate-caused marketing conditions it is unfeasible to harvest more sweet cherries.
- A long, cool spring followed by rapid heating as cherry blooms emerged limited pollination required for preferred larger fruit. While fruit size is smaller than expected, this year's crop was still packable despite some firmness and stem retention issues. There was simply no market for them.
- In 2021, Oregon Department of Agriculture ranked sweet cherries as the state's 18th most valuable commodity with a \$67,493,000 value. When final cherry production reports are tallied in September, expect that value to take a tremendous hit.

In light of current circumstances and to provide the necessary support to our cherished sweet cherry producers, I earnestly request that you declare a State Disaster for the Oregon cherry industry. Such a declaration would enable the affected farmers to access critical resources and relief measures to help them recover from the damage incurred.

JEFFREY A. HELFRICH
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
DISTRICT 52



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

I am confident that your timely intervention and support in declaring a state disaster for the Oregon cherry industry will not only provide much-needed relief to our farmers but also reinforce the state's commitment to protecting and fostering its agricultural heritage.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jeff Helfrich
State Representative
House District 52